Theme : Reporting wars

1. What price freedom? Global reporting trends and journalistic integrity

COMMENTARY

On 18 May 2009, the ABC's Ultimo Centre in Sydney, Australia, and on May 22, Massey University's Wellington campus in New Zealand were host to twin conferences on war reporting. Jointly organised by the global aid organisation International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Australian Centre of Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Massey's School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, the conferences were attended and contributed to by senior international and national news media people—including many who had themselves reported wars—as well as humanitarian, legal and military representatives. The conferences addressed: the role and responsibilities of the journalist in reporting conflict; media, humanitarian and military relationships; an apparent increasing targeting of journalists in conflict zones; and the application of international humanitarian law in times of conflict. The following address by Chris Cramer was the keynote speech at both conferences.

Keywords: conflict reporting, foreign correspondent, journalism training, post-traumatic journalism training, war correspondents, war reporting

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THE RESPONSIBILITIES and challenges of reporting conflict is a subject which is very, very dear to my heart and one on which I have changed my mind several times during the 40 years or so I have spent

in our remarkable industry. As you progress through the media profession, it is acceptable—in fact, it is highly desirable—if you change your mind on the way. If you don't, there is always a risk you may sound too sure of yourself. Look around the industry these days and I think you will recognise what I mean: those journalists who think they're the story rather than the people they report on.

I am reminded today that it is seven years since I last visited Australia and 10 years since I last visited New Zealand. During that time, incredibly, 932 and 1196 [respectively] of our media colleagues around the world have died doing the job they love. Those figures are from the International News Safety Institute, of which I have the pleasure of being honorary president.

The institute's's figures, quite properly, always count journalists and those people who support them—whether it's producers or camera teams or support staff such as translators and others. We draw no artificial distinction when it comes to media workers—they are all in pursuit of the story.

That disgusting figure of 932/1196, of course, does not include our colleagues who have been seriously injured, suffered minor injuries, or been taken hostage, beaten, or otherwise harassed while doing their jobs. And frequently this has all happened a long way away from a so-called war zone or hostile terrain. Often media workers die—or are murdered—in their home countries, targeted by groups or governments that simply wish to silence them for good.

Challenges and trends

I want to first address not just the challenges to our safety and our welfare, but also some trends in global reporting which should cause us a variety of concerns, about challenges to our integrity. As well, of course, as the challenges we all face by the global economic meltdown. Is the industry in such a mess, in such chaos and crisis, that fair and balanced reporting from conflict zones, as well as other locations, is simply too expensive for much of the industry to bear?

Who does the reporting when reporters can't afford to get on an aircraft? Even drive a few hundred kilometres to cover the story? What price a free press if our business models can't sustain our work? If information is seen as just a commodity—something that should be freely available—how can any media organisation, certainly those who need to pay their way, survive?

I also want to consider the changing role of the media and journalism and

whether we have a role to play in peace-building or responding to humanitarian disasters. What should our role be alongside the NGOs and humanitarian organisations, alongside the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)? What should their involvement be?

Is it acceptable—as we pursue journalism which might affect the outcome of an event—for us to form a temporary bond with them in the interests of the outcome? A marriage of convenience maybe? And what is media detachment anyway when it comes to human life and suffering? Do we as journalists have a stake in a story's outcome—or are we above all that?

And I want to comment about so-called journalism of attachment. Is the traditional role of the impartial journalist changing? Crucially, do audiences, readers, consumers want us to have a point of view? Will they tire of us—and abandon us—if we hold true to the notion of impartiality and balance?

It occurred to me on the plane here from New York that it wasn't that long ago that giving a speech on the challenges and responsibilities of reporting wars would have seemed a little far-fetched. I mean, doesn't a reporter or correspondent go where a reporter goes, do the business, and then get back home again? Have a few beers—or a few more—do your expenses, and then sit back for the next assignment? That's certainly the media world that I joined 40 or more years ago.

I still have a vivid recollection of a certain young, very brash and subsequently very famous BBC war correspondent coming into one of the many bars at the BBC. This correspondent proudly displayed one of those long, drop-down wallets full of company credit cards after being assigned to his first major war (actually, it was the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, which certainly dates both him and me).

'You see these BBC credit cards,' he boasted. 'When you get these, you will know you have arrived at the top.'

Back then—and maybe even in some places now—war reporting was seen as the absolute top of the profession. Everything else you did was a transition to that high point. And, crucially, if you didn't cover wars you didn't get to the top. Go find a war and get promoted is what I was taught.

But I recall absolutely nothing in my training about having any responsibilities concerning war coverage. My BBC training gave me all I needed to know about fairness and balance and impartiality of course. But it did nothing to prepare me for a conflict area. No safety training, no guidance, no stress

management and absolutely no comprehension about how I might react to a situation like that.

I also had not a clue about how to handle the victims of a conflict zone—how to report sensitively on their situation, or my responsibilities towards them. It wasn't something I was at all prepared for.

The war correspondents of my youth were, of course, passionate and courageous journalists. But they didn't seem to me to be very sensitive souls—or, if they were, they did a very good job of concealing it. And the truth is that black humour and excessive drink was what seemed to keep most of us going in those days.

A sudden stop

Full disclosure here—I was never a war correspondent—[though] I did spend some time in Zimbabwe in 1979 and 1980 in the dying days of the war there. And I still recall a few scary days covering the urban riots in Britain and the Troubles, as we called them, in Northern Ireland.

But any ambitions I might have had about spending a lifetime in a conflict zone came to a pretty sudden stop in 1980 when I was briefly and unfortunately taken hostage inside the Iranian embassy in Britain of all places.

I was there to secure a visa to go and cover the American hostages being held inside their embassy in Iran. A very brief time inside the London embassy waiting for a visa, and then it was stormed by six terrorists pursuing some secessionist cause against Iran.

The gunmen had been armed and trained by supporters in Iraq. Looking back it was definitely a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyway, that was the end of any plans I had for war reporting. It only took a couple of days as a hostage to realise that war zones were not the place for me—central London included! [I'm] not sure how you phrase it here in Australia and New Zealand, where I come from, they describe it as losing my bottle. I had lost my nerve.

Lessons

I am recounting this to try and explain that there was a brief period for me—after the siege in London—when I seriously considered leaving the profession. The BBC advised me to go to a psychiatrist but I refused—not at all the done thing in Britain in the 1980s. And I also didn't want to acknowledge

that I had a problem with stress or after-effects, or whatever fancy name they gave it in those days, very much before the term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' came along.

I am a lot wiser these days. Had I have known then what I know now, then I would have happily embraced the closest shrink I could find—multiple shrinks even. Instead, I had a wretched time for probably longer than I care to admit to: sleepless nights, paranoia, guilt, sadness, all the stuff you read about. I decided to come off the road and concentrate on news editing and assignment duties back at base.

Seriously, it took me several years to realise that the media industry was in the Dark Ages when it came to taking the safety and welfare of their staff seriously. We were sending staff and freelancers off to cover wars with no training, no protective equipment, and no real assessment of what risks they might be getting into. Astonishing when you look back on it now, but that was the case—and it took several deaths or serious injuries before the industry, certainly in Britain, woke up to the fact. Maybe here too.

To make matters worse, we were probably encouraging risk taking by singling out risky war reporting for annual journalism awards. You know the kind of reporting I am talking about: the breathless piece to camera by the plucky correspondent at the front line, kneeling down as the shells fly overhead. Great television or radio, every time sending out a signal to aspiring young reporters that this is what you need to do to get to the top.

I have a theory that our profession has been slower than it should have been in realising that only fools go and cover stories without the appropriate knowledge, training and the protective equipment we need. Police and firemen, members of the armed forces, would never dream of putting themselves or their staff in harm's way without pausing first and thinking about the consequences.

Yet for some bizarre reason, it seemed feeble for journalists to give a moment's thought to that. And we have learned a very hard lesson. Down the years an unacceptable number of media have paid the price for that ignorance. And only recently have mature news organisations woken up to some basic facts about how dangerous our profession can be, not just in war zones, but in covering potentially dangerous stories much closer to home.

My own change of mind—epiphany if you like—coincides with the realisation, sometime in the early 1990s that, as managers and employers, we

were likely to get ourselves sued if we didn't face up to our responsibilities. It wasn't sufficient for us to believe that staff in the field were best placed to assess their own risks. We, as bosses, were responsible for where they went and what they did.

I can probably narrow my wake-up call to the coverage of the siege of Dubrovnik in 1991 when the BBC news team there made the intelligent assessment that, with the city under constant bombardment, they should pull out rather than risk their lives. Back behind my desk in London, I was furious that our competitors had decided to stay—and likely pick up all those broadcast awards—which they did of course.

But it made me a lousy manager. This was about my staff. It wasn't about media awards and it sure as hell wasn't about me.

The BBC is very good about this kind of change. For all its problems, its bureaucracy, it is very quick to realise that some things matter more than others. So we changed—not overnight, of course, because it is never that easy.

BBC guidelines

Our working party tried to draw up some simple operating guidelines for staff working in hostile areas. Needless to say, our staff thought we were mad. That's another BBC tradition. Managers are mad and journalists should be left alone to get on with the important stuff of covering stories and changing the world. They thought we had completely lost it when we published some simple safety guidelines:

- No story was worth a life
- No picture sequence was worth an injury
- No piece of audio or video was worth endangering our staff members

Pretty simple stuff, and yet you would have thought we had changed the British constitution. Many BBC journalists were enraged that we had seen fit to somehow diminish their life's calling ... to undermine their story telling... to insult their intelligence...

If you look back to that period—less than 20 years ago—it all seems rather sad. This was not rocket science. We were simply stating the obvious to reporters and those who worked with them: we don't expect you to go off and get killed or injured for the sake of the story; it is okay to say 'no'; when we say it's voluntary, we mean it; that is not some weasel management phrase designed to stop you suing us.

Furthermore, we are going to get you trained for war zones or hostile zones. We will give you the best protective clothing and vehicles that money will buy. We will insure you. We will also insure freelancers. And while we are at it, you can't go to a war zone unless you have been trained. And yes, we do reserve the right to stop you being assigned if you don't agree.

And—you have guessed it—many of our staff wriggled and whinged and did all they could to confound our new policies. Except the smart ones, who signed up for the courses, claimed their flak jackets, and privately thanked us for helping the industry grow up.

Looking around at the industry today—here as well—I am full of admiration at the way the networks and some of the print media have become industry leaders when it comes, not just to a culture of safety, but also a culture of awareness, that we have a complete duty of care towards our staff. And that duty of care extends not just to their physical wellbeing, but also to their mental wellbeing.

Is the cost worth it?

One issue which of course is pretty obvious given what is going on in our industry, is whether we will all be able to afford that kind of support, given the business pressure on us. It might be very tempting for some media organisations to see safety training and welfare support as an easy target for savings when the balance sheet gets squeezed.

Wrong. It can't be touched. If we aspire to cover the news—at home or overseas—it remains the price of doing business, the cost of entry. If media employers can't afford to protect their staff then get out of the business and leave it to those who can. And they shouldn't think that handing off the business of tough and dangerous coverage to freelancers somehow gets them off the safety hook. It doesn't.

No responsible news organisation should believe for a moment that freelancers are on their own. They deserve the same duty of care as staffers —training, equipment and insurance. End of debate.

I have talked a lot about the safety and welfare of the media today and [make] no apologies for that. If we can't keep our journalists, our cameramen, photographers and producers safe, then we have no journalism.

Harold Evans, distinguished former editor of the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* in Britain, said a few years ago that the real truth lies buried under

the rubble of every conflict. I think what he meant was that only through informed and painstaking journalism—clearing away the pieces of the truth one-by-one and examining the evidence—can we provide a clarity of analysis and commentary which might beat a path through the spin and the occasional deceit which can obscure the real facts of any situation. Particularly, the facts behind a man-made conflict.

And I don't believe that being first—breaking news—is necessarily the be-all and end-all of journalism. On occasions, far from it.

Continuous news on TV and on radio—the brilliance of networks like CNN, BBC and Sky—frequently lends itself to the notion of first, but inaccurate. Breathless, hyped reporting which does nothing to help an audience understand what is really important or significant. Frequently a triumph of form over content. News with an underlying drumbeat of fear packaged with the sole intent of scaring the crap out of the audience and driving up the ratings—what has been described as run-for-your-life TV. Every day is chaos: if the terrorists and the drive-by shooters don't get you, then the sharks on the beaches will.

Real life is not like that. Some days can be really quite dull, thank God.

Another unfortunate criticism levelled at 24-hour news is that it is never wrong for long. Or, put another way, correct the facts as you go and pray the audience forgive you in the long run.

As I said earlier, one of the obvious dangers caused by the downward pressure on costs and staffing in our industry is the subsequent reliance on freelancers and of indigenous media to do our jobs for us. In-country journalists have always been the bedrock of global reporting but we need to reflect on the fact that 90 percent of all media killed around the world in the last few years are victims in their own countries. The bulk of the attrition rate is not made up of travelling media flying in and out to cover the dangerous stories.

And statistics from INSI and other media groups also point out that many of the in-country deaths tend to be deliberate murders. Not accidents. Not our colleagues caught in the crossfire of the story they are covering, but targeted—because they are journalists.

That is one of the horrible reasons why INSI has spent so much of its time working with the United Nations to ensure that the death, the occasional targeting and murder of our colleagues around the world, can't continue without international protest.

INSI believes that the global community has ducked and weaved for years in taking responsibility for the protection and safety of journalists and those who work with them. The Red Cross, the Geneva Convention and UNESCO speak on press freedom, yet the killings have gone on. The International Criminal Court—as of yet—does not have journalism and free expression within its remit. So we turned to the United Nations.

In 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1738, which placed it at the feet of the UN Secretary-General. Three years ago this resolution declared that governments have a responsibility to protect the media in conflict zones. Further, the UN Secretary-General was asked to include details about threats and risks facing journalists in his annual report.

It hasn't stopped the killings of course—but it is an important start, I think.

Working with the NGOs

I said at the start that I wanted to say something about the media's relationship with the humanitarian organisations, the NGOs. What should that relationship be? How cosy can we get to ensure that we get to the heart of the real and significant issues taking place in the world?

First, some full disclosure: One of the stories I am most proud of in my career—in playing a small part in reporting—is the terrible famine in Ethiopia in 1984. I didn't go to Ethiopia to report it, but I did send BBC's Michael Buerk and the late Reuters' cameraman Mohamed Amin to the country twice to report on what the aid agencies told us was an impending crisis of unimaginable proportions.

The agencies were right of course. And I am very glad that I listened to the Save the Children Fund, World Vision and to others, and worked very closely with them to ensure the world got a full and horrible picture of what was happening in Africa.

Was I used by those aid groups? Sure, of course I was used. We travelled in their aircraft and we gave them name checks all the way. Who cares that some might say we were in bed with the aid groups? For me then—and now—it was a legitimate bond between charities and the BBC to provide coverage that led to Live Aid and to tens of thousands of people being saved.

One thing is pretty clear to me given the economic mess facing the media industry. The bond, partnership if you like, between the media and

humanitarian groups, needs to get much stronger over the next few years if we still aspire to cover the world properly.

Most aid groups that I know have staff with video and still cameras, are likely to be on the scene before—or maybe even instead of—us. Given the clampdown on foreign travel for most media it seems to me that they could become our only lifeline when it comes to certain stories. We better treat them well because they could be doing much of our newsgathering for us.

Let's not be naive here. Of course there are risks for both sides in this relationship becoming too cosy. Groups like the ICRC and humanitarian aid agencies are our friends and sometimes our most difficult partners. They provide excellent sources, but they frequently see the media as useful in their own cause.

There is more pressure on journalism these days to take sides, not to be partisan, but to show more attachment to universal values and to recognise in our reporting the plain and obvious facts rather than to pursue notions of 'balance'—balance that might actually distort reality. As some might say—if it looks like a duck, it probably is a duck.

All of this means that there is ever more pressure on the big players in global media—BBC, Reuters, CNN, Aljazeera—to get the story right and not to be seduced either by the worthy sentiments of the humanitarian lobby or by the national interests of those involved in the fighting.

A question of integrity

Let me now get to my last point—that of integrity and transparency.

One of the more unfortunate recent trends is that many people around the world have lost faith in the traditional media. In many opinion polls we have replaced lawyers and politicians as the least trusted of any profession. We can moan or groan about that—protest our innocence—or we can maybe better understand why this might have happened.

One way forward—one way to start repairing this breach of confidence with our audiences and readers—might be to focus all the time on how transparent we are with the public.

Are we continuing to believe that we are the gatekeepers of all public information? That without us the world will collapse into anarchy and disorder? Do we give enough thought to how our reporting can affect the outcome of major events, like war and conflict? Do we realise that these are

not just stories? They're real and they affect real people and real lives. How can journalists be protected by the concept of international humanitarian law if we break the bond between that principle and those who support it?

Bad reporting can compromise our safety and the safety of those we are reporting on. The stakes in this respect are very high indeed.

Conclusion

Let me end. I love my profession and yes, I do want to leave my mark on the world when I leave it. I'm not at all embarrassed to tell you that I want to make a difference, whether it's organising the coverage in Ethiopia or working to keep our journalists a little safer in the world. But I have figured out that I will be more effective if I admit that I don't know everything about the stories I cover. That telling my audiences or clients about what I don't know is as important as telling them about what I do know.

Crucially, I need to share the gradual discovery of information with them and, even more important, I need to let them know if I have made any bargains or compromises along the way.

Journalists are also entitled to have a point of view—to make it obvious that they can only report on what they see. Artificial balance in our reporting, journalism without passion, completely misses the point.

Good journalism should not be blind to apparent good and apparent evil. There is no moral equivalency in the world between these two extremes. That's what I mean by transparent journalism. That's what I think is journalism with real integrity. Together with a real appreciation that we, the journalists, are not at all important in this process. But the job we do really is.

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